

SOUTH-AFRICA AND THE SPANISH FLU OF 1918

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray Thee Lord, my soul to keep

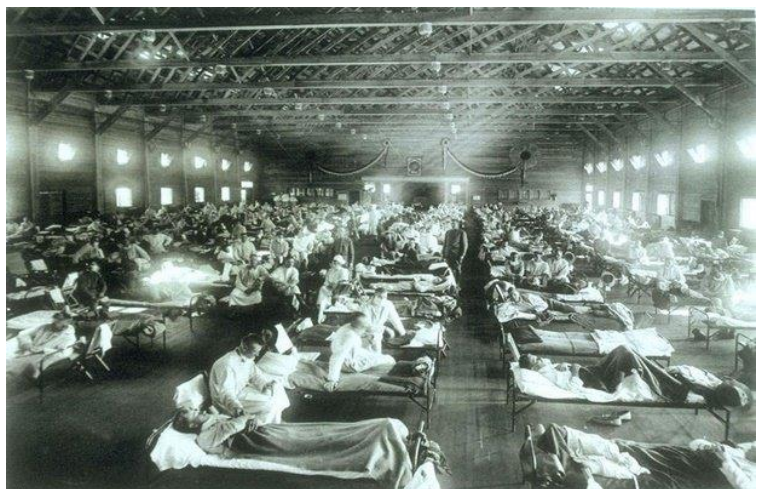


If I should die before I wake
I pray Thee Lord, my soul to take

Our soldiers were returning home from World War I and they were not prepared for the enemy they were about to face back on home ground. The war claimed an estimate of 15,000 South African lives but the enemy they were about to face back home would claim many, many more.

The first cases of an unusually severe and deadly strain of influenza, popularly called Spanish Flu or 'Great Flu', were diagnosed on 14 September 1918 in Durban. This started the worst pandemic ever in South African history. Of a total population of just over 6 million at the time, nearly half contracted the disease, while close to 140,000 died within a few weeks. The disease spread throughout the entire country and often whole families were ill or dying, with nobody left to care for them. Doctors and nurses did their best, but were too few to treat the ill. The Black and Coloured sections of the population were most severely affected, especially the mineworkers, who suffered dreadfully. The death-rate of Whites was also unusually high. Deaths were usually due to secondary bacterial infections, causing pneumonia. As this was before modern antibiotic treatment was available, there was no effective cure. The epidemic peaked in October of that year and the virus caused the death of an estimate of 50 million people throughout the world.

In March 1918 a worldwide influenza epidemic broke out, that led to the deaths of an estimate 50 million people worldwide. The pandemic spread simultaneously in Europe, Asia and North America over a twelve-month period between the last months of 1918 and the beginning of 1919. The First World War, while not the direct cause of its outbreak, contributed to its rapid spread worldwide. Soldiers, malnourished and battle weary were particularly vulnerable to infection. As they were constantly being moved between different theatres of war across the globe they spread the virus to many countries, including South Africa, where it made its appearance in September 1918. By the end of 1918, more than 127 000 Blacks and 11 000 Whites had succumbed to the epidemic. While different opinions exist as to the exact source of infection and its spread in South Africa, there is general agreement that the participation of soldiers in the War was a direct contributory factor in its arrival in South Africa. Its arrival in South Africa was initially linked to two ships, the Jaroslav and the Veronej, which arrived in Cape Town on the 13 and 18 September with members of the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) on board. It was established that both ships had docked at Sierra Leone, one of the places regarded as a central point of infection. In general about 500 000 people died of the epidemic in South Africa, the fifth hardest hit by the pandemic worldwide.



The 'Spanish flu' spread to South Africa in two waves, the first being via the port of Durban, from where it spread to the rest of Natal and the Witwatersrand. Within two weeks the epidemic spread to the rest of the population. The second wave of infection spread from Cape Town harbour to the rest of the Cape, the Orange Free State and the Western Transvaal. A second trajectory of the epidemic spreading from the Cape, reached the Northern Cape, Ciskei and Transkei. This second wave is regarded as the one that came with the ships the Jaroslav and the Veronej.

A number of factors contributed to the rapid spread of the epidemic throughout South Africa. Firstly, South Africa had a number of ports and harbours from which sailors and soldiers spread the infection. Secondly by 1918, South Africa had a well-developed railway network of 10 000 miles, making it easier for the epidemic to penetrate the most remote areas. Thirdly the migrant labour system ensured that the virus travelled with infected miners on their way to the mines or their homes. In six weeks 300 000 South Africans had died of the flu.



In towns like Kimberley, Addis Ababa, Port Louis, Windhoek, Ilorin, Sekondi, Bloemfontein and Bathurst, over 4 percent of their populations were lost to "Spanish" flu. With deaths topping 300 per day in Kimberley at the height of the epidemic, a contemporary calculated that, at that rate, in sixteen months no one would have been left alive in the city.

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For Afrikaners, the epidemic followed a series of calamities that included the death of 26 000 women and children in the Anglo-Boer War, the failure of the 1914 Rebellion, and the growth of the poor White problem. A reader wrote to *De Burger* the following letter:

'So 'n treurigheid: oorlog, droogte, hongersnood en pestilensie; aan alle kante dreig die gevaar ons, terwyl die spaanse griep duisende van slagoffers daaglik om ons heen weg maai'


Translation:

Such suffering: war, drought, hunger, and plague; danger threatens us from all sides, while daily the Spanish flu decimates thousands in our midst.

The sense of despair was communicated in the following poem published in the November 1918 issue of *Die Vaderland*:

'Spaanse Griep, van oorseese strand, Wat maak jij in ons vaderland? Het ons dan nie genoeg gelij. Vir reg het ons so swaar baklei. Baje vrouwe, kinders en mans Is deur honger, moord, koe'el en lans, In die doodsvalei gejaagd, Hul lot word deur die volk beklagd. Spaanse Griep, jij is nog 'n dolk In die deurboorde hart van 'n volk, Wie s'n wonde glad nie wil heel, Want hui verlies is al te veel; . . . Spaanse Griep, gaat tog weg van hier, Want as jij nou nog langer duur, Dan blij daar oor, slegs hier en daar, Van ons uitgemoorde volk 'n paar'

Coughs and Sneezes Spread Diseases



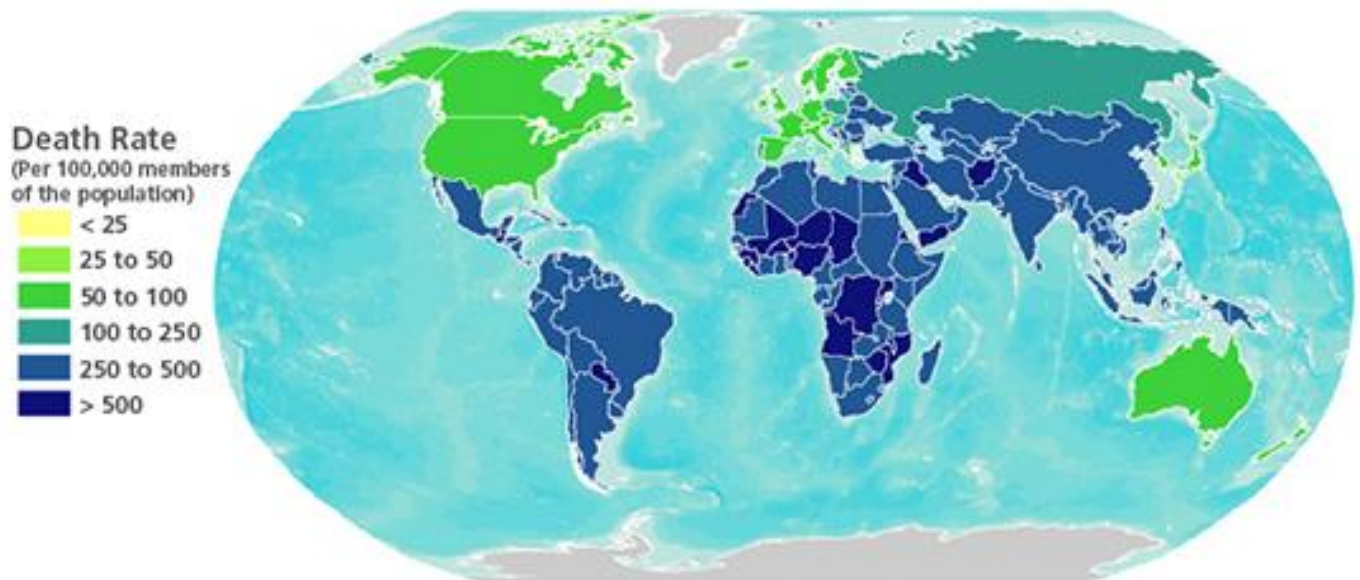
As Dangerous as Poison Gas Shells
SPREAD OF SPANISH INFLUENZA
MENACES OUR WAR PRODUCTION

U. S. Public Health Service Begins Na-
-tion-wide Health Campaign.

For Africans the epidemic came after the hardships of the 1913 Land Act, war-time inflation, the droughts of 1914-1916, and floods of 1916-1917.

'It is as if the Plagues of Egypt are upon us. First the awful War, then this pestilence and now boils, and the near dread of a famine, the season is so against all crops and fruits.'

South Africa was country fifth hardest hit country in the world by the 1918 flu. Almost as many South Africans died from the 1918 flu as did Americans.



After the epidemic an estimate total of 500,000 people died in South Africa due to the “Spanish Flu”, another 500,000 children was left orphaned and South Africa’s demographics were irreversibly impacted.

**DID YOUR ANCESTOR
DIE IN THE SPANISH
FLU EPIDEMIC?**

